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Aired June 23, 2003 - 15:11 ET

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JUDY WOODRUFF, CNN ANCHOR: Today a Supreme Court decision on affirmative action represents at least a partial victory for the University of Michigan and its admissions policy. With me now to talk more about the ruling is the president of the university, Mary Sue Coleman. Dr. Coleman, will the university continue to use race as a factor in its undergraduate admissions?

MARY SUE COLEMAN, PRESIDENT, UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN: Well, we think the important part of the ruling today is that in fact the court did send a clear signal. It affirmed Bakke; it said that we can use affirmative action in admissions. And so yes, we will continue to use race as one of many factors in admission in undergraduate, as well as law school admissions, and the court's given us a road map. And so we're pretty happy about that.

WOODRUFF: Let me quote very quickly to you something that Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg wrote in her dissent in the opinion, the six to three decision on the undergraduate, knocking down the undergraduate admissions guidelines. She said, "If honesty is the best policy, surely Michigan's accurately described, fully disclosed college affirmative action program is preferable to achieving similar numbers through winks, nods and disguises."

Is that what the university is going to have to do, resort to winks, nods and disguises here?

COLEMAN: Well, what we may do is to fashion our undergraduate policy along the lines of the law school policy, which the court said is fine and said that the law school policy is constitutional. And what that means is it's a more individualized attention to every single application. And we're happy to do that.

We're going to be working on it as soon as we return to campus. And we will have the new policy in place this fall.

WOODRUFF: But why isn't that what Justice Ginsburg describes here? In other words, a wink and a nod, but effecting the same result?

COLEMAN: Well, we believe that we can do this in a way that the court has found constitutional. And our other policy, the earlier one that the court struck down, was a screening device, because we get so many applications. So what we may have to do is to have more admissions counselors, hire more people for the undergraduate admissions, do more intensive work, but we are very happy to do that because the central principle was upheld today, and that's just a tremendous victory.

WOODRUFF: When Justice Clarence Thomas refers to your undergraduate -- I'm sorry, to your law school policy as an elitist admissions policy -- this is a policy that's upheld -- what do you say to critics like Justice Thomas?

COLEMAN: Well, of course, we respectfully disagree with the justice. We believe that our policy provides a fair and equitable way for people who are qualified. We get so many more qualified, highly qualified applicants than we can possibly admit.

You have to have a system to select among those highly qualified applicants. The court has found today that what we do is fair and legal. And it's constitutional. And so we're just really happy about that.

WOODRUFF: So what do you say to undergraduates across the country who were counting -- minorities who were counting on getting some sort of a leg up at the university and who now are saying I don't understand how my application is going to be considered any different from anyone else?

COLEMAN: Well, we believe that our policy before was a fair policy because we have so many more applicants to get to our undergraduate programs than we can possibly admit. And we thought we did something fair and legal there.

And I want to let students know that now we'll be looking, using a slightly different policy, but we're going to give every application a fair look. And we're going to build a diverse class because we think that's the best educational opportunity for students, both minority and non-minority. And we're going to be tailoring our policies in a way that the court says is constitutional.

WOODRUFF: Quickly. A poll we're releasing today, Gallup Poll, says more than two-thirds of Americans believe colleges should not consider an applicant's racial background in making admissions decisions. Is your university out of step with most American people?

COLEMAN: I don't think we're out of step at all. I think the applications process and the admissions process to universities is highly nuanced and complex. And I don't think you can capture that in a simple question.

When people understand our policies more, I do believe that they agree. But having a diverse class is important. And what the courts told us today is that it's perfectly constitutional to use race as one of many factors, and that's what we're going to do.

WOODRUFF: Dr. Mary Sue Coleman, president of the University of Michigan, thank you very much for coming by.

COLEMAN: Thank you. WOODRUFF: It's good to talk to you. Thank you very much.

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